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ABSTRACT

This publication describes how teachers can begin to gain understanding of diverse students and families and their cultural values, behavioral standards, and social ideals. It presents specific examples of cross-cultural conflicts and illustrates strategies for resolving them. Data come from the Bridging Cultures action research project in California. The paper begins by describing a practical framework for understanding cultural differences, which includes the two contrasting value systems of individualism and collectivism. After elaborating on these differing perspectives, the paper presents examples of how some of the conflicts have played out across seven southern California classrooms and discusses strategies for resolving conflicts using the collectivist-individualistic framework. Some of the conflicts include independence versus helpfulness, cognitive versus social development, oral expression versus respect for authority, parents' roles versus teachers' roles, and personal property versus sharing. Easy ways to avoid conflict and promote harmony include making the classroom hospitable, engaging parents as resources, gauging how to support parent involvement, and understanding parents' ways of participating in school decision making. The paper concludes by discussing the issue of tapping community knowledge through ethnographic inquiry. (Contains 28 references.) (SM)

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Knowledge Brief

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# Bridging Cultures in Our Schools: New Approaches That Work

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***As a female European American teacher reports to an immigrant Latino father that his daughter is doing well in class — speaking out, expressing herself, taking an active role — he looks down at his lap and does not respond. Thinking that perhaps he has not understood, the teacher again praises his daughter's ability to speak out in class and explains that it is very important for children to participate orally. Looking even more uncomfortable, the father changes the subject. The teacher gets the impression that this parent is not interested in his daughter's school success, and she feels frustrated and a bit resentful. Toward the end of the conference, the father asks, with evident concern, "How is she doing? She talking too much?" The teacher is confused. This parent does care whether his daughter is doing well, but why doesn't he understand what she has been telling him?*** *

What's blocking communication here are differences in culture — tacit yet deep-seated beliefs about what matters in life and how people should behave. The teacher is reporting behavior she assumes any parent would be glad to hear about. But it may be behavior the father doesn't condone: he's taught his daughter not to "show off" or stand out from the group.

Exchanges like this, not just between adults but also between teachers and students, occur in classrooms every day, as teachers face greater cultural diversity than at any time since the turn of the century. In the past two decades, U.S. schools have absorbed waves of students from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and the Philippines. A continuous stream of families from Mexico, Central



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America, and the Caribbean, along with immigrants from China and Korea, have come to the United States, all seeking better education and economic opportunities, more politically stable lives. Southern California, for example, where children in the huge Los Angeles Unified School District speak some 80 different languages, has been called the most diverse place on the planet.

Teachers who serve each day as cultural mediators know the challenge goes beyond language. Even as they try to help immigrant students navigate a new system of education, their own teaching methods and most routine classroom expectations can come into perplexing conflict with children's cultural ways of knowing and behaving. For example, a student may resist offering the right answer after another student has answered incorrectly, in order not to embarrass that person in front of the group. A student raised to value consensus may find decisions made by majority rule inconsiderate or even unfair, instead of simply democratic.

A critical step in making schools places where all children can learn is for **educators to first see how their own cultural values operate in the classroom.**

It's not only immigrant students whose cultural values may differ from those underlying most classroom practice. U.S.–born students from a variety of backgrounds — American Indian, African American students, Latino students whose families have lived here for generations — may also feel alienated by common classroom practices.

Teachers in these diverse school settings quickly discover the need for social understanding that goes beyond the relatively superficial aspects of culture often addressed in multicultural education, such as major holidays, religious customs, dress and foods. What's missing, teachers report, is a deeper kind of understanding — of the social ideals, values, and behavioral standards that shape approaches to child-rearing and schooling, first in one's own culture and then in the cultures of one's students.

This *Knowledge Brief* explores a practical way teachers can begin to gain such understanding, looks at some specific examples of cross-cultural conflicts, and illustrates strategies for resolving them.

### *The Invisibility of Culture*

Culture is like the air we breathe, permeating all we do. And the hardest culture to examine is often our own, because it shapes our actions in ways that seem second nature. What feels "normal," Small (1998) reminds us, is molded by deeply ingrained social habits and ways of valuing we're scarcely aware of. Learning about one's own culture — "making the familiar strange," as anthropologist George Spindler has called it — is far more challenging than learning about the culture of others ("making the strange familiar") (Spindler & Spindler 1988, pp. 23–24). So a critical step in making schools places where all children can learn is for educators to first see how their own cultural values operate in the classroom — from how they expect children to take part in discussions to whether they expect classroom materials to be shared or used individually (Quiroz & Greenfield in press).

Like individuals and groups, schools have cultures, too. These usually mirror the culture of the dominant society. We know the struggle many children and their parents face in learning English as a second language, and we understand that refugees from troubled homelands often bring emotional burdens. But we may not realize what an enormously difficult transition many must make in learning to decipher a new culture. This is often true, too, for native-born American children when the cultural values at home differ significantly from those of school.

## A Practical Framework for Understanding Cultural Differences

For educators committed to helping students make this transition, the challenge is first to identify, and then find

## Table 1
## Salient Features of Individualism and Collectivism

| **Individualism** (Representative of prevailing U.S. culture) | **Collectivism** (Representative of many immigrant cultures) |
|---|---|
| 1. Fostering independence and individual achievement | 1. Fostering interdependence and group success |
| 2. Promoting self-expression, individual thinking, personal choice | 2. Promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders, group consensus |
| 3. Associated with egalitarian relationships and flexibility in roles (e.g., upward mobility) | 3. Associated with stable, hierarchical roles (dependent on gender, family background, age) |
| 4. Understanding the physical world as knowable apart from its meaning for human life | 4. Understanding the physical world in the context of its meaning for human life |
| 5. Associated with private property, individual ownership | 5. Associated with shared property, group ownership |

ways to bridge cultural differences that have a profound influence on learning. The cultural framework offered here helps meet that challenge. Teachers are finding it a powerful tool for understanding how the expectations for a student at school may conflict with the values of a student's family, how everyday patterns of classroom interaction can work at cross-purposes to the behavioral norms children grow up with.

The framework describes two contrasting value systems: individualism and collectivism, which differ in their relative emphasis on fostering *independence* and success of the individual versus *interdependence* and success of the group (Greenfield 1994). While individualistic cultures stress self-reliance and personal achievement, collectivistic cultures focus more on developing and sustaining a stable, mutually dependent group. These fundamental values help form notions of people's rights and responsibilities, what roles they may take within societies, norms of communication, and ideas of how to rear and educate children. Some have categorized cultures as "agrarian" and "urban-industrial." However, these categories do not coincide perfectly with collectivistic and individualistic characterizations. For example, Japan is both highly industrialized and very collectivistic (Small). The United States, by any measure, is one of the most individualistic societies (Hofstede 1983). By contrast, many recent immigrants, especially those from rural backgrounds, as well as indigenous peoples of the United States, reflect the values of highly collectivistic societies.

Each orientation has benefits and costs. For example, "in socially oriented [collectivistic] societies, the cost of interdependence is experienced as suppression of individual development, while in individualistically oriented cultures, the cost of independence is experienced as alienation" (Kim 1987). The Bridging Cultures work described in this brief (see box on page 16) is premised on the belief that the ability to carefully examine how these orientations tend to be expressed in school-related expectations and behaviors can lead to more thoughtful action.

After briefly elaborating on these differing perspectives, we will present examples of how some of the conflicts have played out across seven southern California classrooms and will look at strategies for resolving conflicts. First, however, we must emphasize that this framework is intended as a tool to help educators think about where differences may lie and, hence, for heading off potential conflict. Although this brief is focused on identifying commonalties within cultures, to avoid the pitfall of stereotyping, we must remember that within any given ethnic group, individuals vary greatly in their beliefs and practices.

### Contrasts Between Individualism and Collectivism

To begin, Table 1 contrasts the two value systems by highlighting features that are most likely to influence classroom communication and learning. Although no society can be characterized entirely by one or the other system, the first column reflects value preferences that will

probably be familiar to most readers. The traditional American faith in free enterprise, the virtues of self-reliance and self-improvement, inculcated throughout the 19th and on into the 20th century — from the pulpit, in McGuffey Readers, and on political platforms — all rest on a sense of competitive individualism that is firmly established in much of U.S. society. We need only look at popular awards — sales representative of the month, season MVP, Oscar winner, or even teacher of the year — to be reminded of the countless ways this society singles out the special worth of individual achievement.

In every study comparing American parents to those of other cultures, even in other industrialized nations, the goal U.S. parents overwhelmingly stress is making their children independent — socially and economically . This primary emphasis on self-reliance, Small notes, colors everything American parents do to socialize their children, "as if this were the most natural and normal — in fact the only — way to proceed through life" (Small, p. 104).

Collectivist societies, however, point their children in a different direction. Many immigrant parents from traditional cultures, for example, see their children's primary role as contributing members of the family unit (Quiroz & Greenfield). Children are expected to understand and act on a strong sense of responsibility toward the group, the family, and the community. Self-worth and esteem are not defined chiefly in terms of individual achievement. They derive, rather, from "the performance of self-sacrificing acts that create social links and bonds" (Quiroz & Greenfield, p. 6). In sharp contrast, young people in individualistic societies are typically expected to make educational and occupational choices that develop their own potential — not necessarily with any consideration for how their success would benefit their families.

Before looking at how these differing orientations can play out in the home and classroom, it's important to reiterate an obvious caution. To generalize is always to simplify, but this dualistic framework is not intended to stereotype cultural behavior. Human experience is far too complex to fit neatly into any conceptual scheme. No society is all one thing or another. Each "strikes a particular balance between individual and group, between independence and interdependence" (Greenfield 1994, p. 4). Even within a particular ethnic group, members are extremely diverse — in education, in socio-economic status, in whether they come from a rural or urban background, in their personalities. Hence, they vary in the degree to which they reflect the dominant values of their group. Cultures themselves also change over time and as they come in contact with each other. Second generation Mexican American girls, for example, have more role flexibility than their mothers did (Goldenberg & Gallimore 1995). Nevertheless, many child-rearing values, taken into new contexts, persist over several generations (Lambert, Hammers, & Frasure-Smith 1979).

The framework's power lies in the way it generates insights and understandings that enable teachers to bridge cultural differences — the way it gets us questioning, trying to identify for ourselves what social expectations and ethical values are at work in a frustrating classroom situation or a parent–teacher conference. Teachers are finding that it helps them rethink daily school-related behavior, their own and that of their students and students' parents. Using it as a tool, teachers can generate their own solutions to problems, make effective instructional decisions, and work with parents as true partners.



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The framework's usefulness has been most thoroughly explored in classrooms in several communities whose large recent immigrant populations are composed chiefly of families from poor, rural communities in Mexico and Central America. Nevertheless, both research and experience suggest that the framework can also be helpful in understanding other immigrant groups, as well as some U.S.–born students and parents from more collectivistic communities. For instance, studies of Korean immigrants and American Indians show that their collectivistic values often conflict with those of the more individualistic U.S. culture (Kim & Choi 1994; Suina & Smolkin 1994).

In fact, given how this framework works to surface underlying beliefs and expectations, we believe it can help generate questions (and answers) about how cultural values operate in all groups.

Human experience is far too complex to fit neatly into any conceptual scheme. No society is all one thing or another.

### *Individualism and Collectivism at Home*

Collectivism and individualism reflect fundamentally different perceptions about knowledge, cognition, and social development. Collectivistic societies are quite hierarchical, and social interaction is strongly defined by age and gender. Children in such societies are less likely to be asked to formulate and share their opinions or to talk about what they are learning in school. The role of sharing opinions and knowledge is reserved for people with higher status (Delgado-Gaitan 1994), and children are taught to respect their elders as the sources of knowledge and wisdom for their community.

Individualistic societies, in contrast, do not see knowledge and wisdom as the special province of designated elders. The self-expression children commonly exhibit toward adults in much of American society would be interpreted as a lack of proper respect in a collectivistic society (Valdés 1996).

Parents in collectivistic cultures tend to cultivate both more psychological and physical closeness with their children. Such closeness is associated with teaching and managing children by "osmosis" more than by verbal means (Azuma 1991). Children are held more and often sleep with their parents when small; infants are carried or otherwise physically close to mothers or other caretakers at all times. In contrast, parents in more individualistic cultures often encourage children to amuse themselves independently and discourage them from requiring constant adult attention (Greenfield & Suzuki 1998).

Even the role of toys is different in collectivistic and individualistic societies. In a collectivistic culture, a toy is an opportunity for sharing. In a more individualistic society it is a source of independent activity, often seen as an opportunity to foster a highly valued "technological intelligence" [analytic thinking removed from its larger social context, as defined by Mundy-Castle (1974)].

The collectivistic orientation also extends to notions of property, with the boundaries of ownership less fixed (Quiroz & Greenfield). Personal items such as clothing, books, and toys are readily shared and are often seen as family rather than private property. These culturally different approaches to material goods include land and natural resources. Indigenous peoples have traditionally regarded the earth as something humans have custody of but do not own. The legacy of these orientations is with us today. Collectivist societies still tend to share resources and cooperate to carry out tasks in agriculture and animal husbandry, as well as in other realms. Though many environmentally conscious citizens in this country would prefer a more cooperative and caring approach to preserving the planet, the ethos of private property presents a formidable obstacle. The United States has created public parks and preserves, but the notion persists that each person is solely responsible for his or her own property.

## The Field Trip

Before Ms. Altchech's fourth-fifth grade class took a field trip to the Ballona Wetlands, to learn about the habitat of many animals and plants within a few miles of their Los Angeles school, a wildlife docent came to prepare the class for the visit. "What do you know about hummingbirds," he asked. Ms. Altchech knew he was looking for "scientific knowledge." But her students began telling stories about their own experiences with hummingbirds. The docent was clearly frustrated with the responses he was getting, and on his next (and final) visit, he "let two stories go by," as Ms. Altchech puts it, until another child began her own story. "No more stories," he insisted. Thereafter, the students were required to confine their comments to scientific observations about birds, other animals, plants, and the environment. The room became silent, and students' responses to questions virtually ceased.

When the docent left, Ms. Altchech invited her students to tell their stories. "They needed to — in order to draw on their own experiences, which usually included family members," she says. She constructed a simple T-chart on the blackboard, putting key phrases from the children's stories on the left side and helping them extract the scientific content to be recorded on the right side of the chart. Then she helped students use "scientific discourse" to talk about what they knew. For instance, she used a student's observation that "the hummingbird's wings moved so fast" to introduce information about the bird's high metabolism and feeding habits. Ms. Altchech cites this as an example of bridging between the more personal and socially-oriented cultures of her immigrant Latino students and the culture of schooling. Not all cultures emphasize separating "content knowledge" from "social experience" in the way that American culture does (Quiroz, Greenfield, & Altchech 1999).

### Individualism and Collectivism at School

These differing world views lead parents to prepare children for school quite differently. In the classroom, as we have noted, differences appear with regard to independence, personal achievement, self-expression, and personal choice. U.S. schools, in line with the individualistic orientation of society, encourage children to become independent thinkers and doers who focus on their own achievement and on fulfilling their own individual needs. Authority, they are taught, does not reside solely in the teacher. They are encouraged to consult texts, build their own knowledge, and even "explain" it to adults at home. In contrast, children raised in collectivistic communities form a sense of self from recognizing their place in the community hierarchy and from affiliation with the group — principally the family. So, for example, when children with this latter orientation are asked to assert their opinions publicly in the classroom, while at home they are expected to listen respectfully, an inner conflict may stifle their participation.

The two orientations also typically lead to different organizational patterns of learning in the classroom. While collectivistic cultures tend to teach to the whole group and allow students to learn from each other (peer-oriented learning) (McAlpine & Taylor 1993), individualistic societies tend to focus on the individual and emphasize individual responsibility for learning, even when instruction is given to the whole group (Estrin & Nelson-Barber 1995). For their many group-oriented immigrant students, the Bridging Cultures Project teachers have to explain why students are not allowed to help each other on state-sponsored achievement tests. For these children, if left to their own devices, learning is nearly always a cooperative venture.

In American education, concepts and facts are often treated as objects or things in themselves, capable of being understood outside of their social context. One criticism many American Indian educational leaders have leveled against U.S. schools is that they teach facts independent of their social and ethical implications (Estrin & Nelson-Barber). In contrast, American Indian societies (like other collectivistic cultures) stress that learners need to consider the social consequences of knowledge and actions on living people and future generations. In earth science, for example, many U.S. teachers might tell students how ores are extracted from mines and smelted for industrial purposes, while a Navajo teacher would probably raise questions about whether digging a mine was good for the community and its descendants.



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## Table 2
## Applying the Framework: Sources of Potential Home-School Conflict

| Individualism | Collectivism |
|---|---|
| 1. Child as individual | 1. Child as part of the group |
| 2. Independence | 2. Helpfulness |
| 3. Praise (to promote self-esteem) | 3. Criticism (to achieve normative behavior) |
| 4. Cognitive skills | 4. Social skills |
| 5. Oral expression | 5. Listening to authority |
| 6. Parent's role includes teaching | 6. Teacher's role includes socializing |
| 7. Personal property | 7. Sharing |

Note: This table is based on Quiroz & Greenfield in press.

## Applying the Framework

The collectivistic–individualistic framework is useful in very concrete ways. It can help teachers to identify and thus avoid potential conflicts. It can also be the basis for taking action that promotes harmony, because it recognizes both belief systems.

### *Identifying Potential Classroom Conflicts*

Research identifies several areas of potential conflict, summarized in Table 2, that teachers may observe in the classroom or in interactions with parents (see, e.g., Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff in press). To repeat, even within highly individualistic or collectivistic cultures, people are, of course, treated both as individuals and as members of a group. It's the *relative emphasis* that makes for important differences and, sometimes, for conflicts. Similarly, people from the same general cultural background may nonetheless show wide variations in behavior, based on their level of formal schooling and socioeconomic status, among other things. More schooling and higher socioeconomic status are generally associated with greater individualism. Poor immigrants from rural sectors of very collectivistic cultures are therefore likely to encounter the most conflict in schools.

When children caught between expectations of home and school are forced to choose one over the other, there is inevitable loss. Parents, teachers, administrators, and students all need some awareness of how these conflicts operate in classrooms and schools, so that all have a hand in addressing them. Unaddressed, these conflicts can cause children to become alienated from their parents or from school (Quiroz & Greenfield). The experiences of the Bridging Cultures teachers show that awareness of the causes of such conflicts almost always leads to new thinking about solutions. Some solutions are quite simple and easily carried out.

The following sections present examples of home-school conflicts and possible strategies teachers can use to help bridge the sometimes differing needs and expectations of a child's school and a child's home. This is different from most accommodation, which works in the opposite direction, with children and parents constantly adjusting to the needs and expectations of the school and the dominant culture. Of course, to do well in U.S. schools, students from different cultural backgrounds have to accommodate to school culture. However, to the degree that teachers can build bridges between home and school, they can better support students in developing the skills they will need to succeed.

### *Independence Versus Helpfulness*

Teachers may highly value children's ability to work independently and to focus on getting their own work done. But parents from a collectivistic orientation tend to care more about how helpful and cooperative their child is in the classroom. Teachers are likely to promote other behaviors or school practices that foster children's increasing independence from their parents, while parents continue to promote interdependence. For instance, parents may help their children in ways teachers

deem inappropriate (e.g., tying their shoes) because it seems to perpetuate dependence.

**Example**

In one school that has a large population of immigrant Latino students, many mothers were "causing a problem" with the federally funded school breakfast program by accompanying their children to school, bringing along younger siblings, and eating breakfast with their children. Some were helping to feed their school-age children. In the eyes of school officials, who were responsible for implementing the federal program, the mothers and siblings were eating food that "belonged" to the children enrolled in the school (see "Personal Property Versus Sharing," below). In fact, a condition of receiving the federal grant was that breakfasts be provided only to the school children. But teachers and administrators were also greatly concerned that the mothers' behaviors were inhibiting the children's development of independence — a goal of the prevailing U.S. culture in schools. The school addressed the problem by posting signs saying no parents would be allowed in the cafeteria during breakfast. The mothers, who were behaving according to their values of sharing and family unity, had great difficulty understanding the school's perspective and mobilized a protest that caused quite an uproar (Raeff, Greenfield, & Quiroz in press).

**Strategy**

The school might have headed off a conflict by explaining to the parents why they could not accompany their children to breakfast and by simultaneously looking for other opportunities to invite whole families to the school to share a meal or other experiences.

In the example above of mothers helping their children to eat, the mothers are acting as role models for helpfulness, which their children try to emulate — by helping even when helping is not an assigned task. In the classroom, a teacher can recognize and accept children's need to help others. Instead of having one "room monitor" or one person to do each small classroom job, pairs or small groups may do it together. Parents, too, like to be asked to help solve classroom problems or respond to needs and will come up with culturally appropriate strategies if the teacher establishes a climate of acceptance.

### *Praise Versus Criticism*

Parents with a strongly collectivistic orientation are likely to be uncomfortable hearing extended praise of their children. Praise singles a child out from the group, whereas criticism is perceived as having a normative effect, bringing the child in line with the group (Greenfield, Quiroz, & Raeff; Greenfield, Raeff, & Quiroz 1996). The teachers of the Bridging Cultures Project noted that the standard wisdom in most American schools is to "sandwich a small amount of criticism in between a lot of praise." But this advice may not be helpful to teachers working with children from relatively collectivistic cultures. The children themselves may be very uncomfortable with public praise, not because they are shy, but because they've grown up believing no one member should be singled out, since doing so tends to diminish the others.

**Example**

We saw in the parent–teacher encounter that opened this brief how uncomfortable the father became when the teacher praised his daughter's progress. He didn't respond, then tried to change the subject. In such situations the teacher may conclude that the parent doesn't care about the child's achievement. More likely, however, is that the parent places greater value on ensuring that the child's behavior is brought in line with expectations — a focus on normative behavior rather than on standing out from the group. The discomfort with public praise that children experience does not automatically fade with age and experience in the U.S. school system. It can continue through college and graduate school.

**Strategy**

Teachers can praise students in groups or as a whole class, rather than individually in front of others. Teachers can also stress how an individual child's performance contributes to the success of the class. In individual student–teacher conferences or while assembling items for a portfolio or self-evaluation, praise can be balanced





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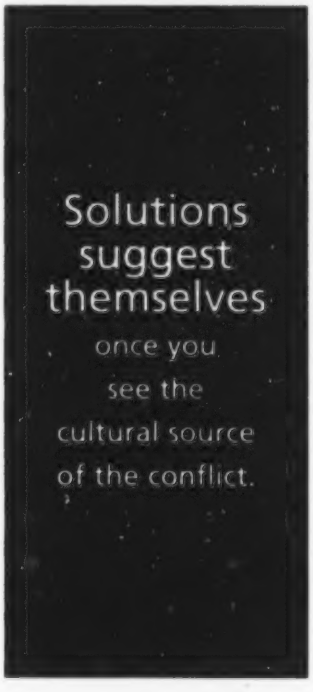
with suggestions for improvement. Praise for helping another student may be more acceptable than praise focusing on personal achievement. Students also get important feedback in the form of grades and comments on their work, and positive statements can certainly be a part of such feedback. During class discussion, students who are not comfortable volunteering may be willing to talk if the teacher calls on them, although some will still prefer not to be singled out.

### *Cognitive Versus Social Development*

Collectivistic parents may see cognitive development as dependent on social or moral development. Many parents do not distinguish between education as *schooling* and education as *upbringing*. In traditional Mexican culture, the concept of being well-educated (*bien educado*) is grounded in the larger social context: intellectual growth is inseparable from social development. Cognitive skill is not typically seen as an attribute valued apart from development as a moral and social being (Goldenberg & Gallimore 1995). Parallels exist in other cultures. For example, Japanese education is based on a belief that there are "a variety of social skills that have to come first before you can focus fruitfully … on the intellectual development of the child" (LeVine 1991, p. 92).




**Example**

One Latino immigrant father interviewed by researchers expressed a thought echoed by many others: Formal study and moral rectitude "go hand in hand …. It would be impossible to get to the university if one doesn't have good behavior, if one isn't taught to respect others" (Goldenberg & Gallimore, p. 198).

**Strategy**

Recognizing a parent's primary focus on the child's social behavior, a teacher can start conversations with examples of how the child interacts in the classroom. After first talking about the child's social skills, the teacher may move into discussion of her academic performance. Teachers may explain to parents that individual achievement is important in U.S. schooling. But if parents draw the conversation back to social aspects of their child's development, teachers should respond to their concerns.

### *Oral Expression Versus Respect for Authority*

Skillful self-expression, critical thinking, and the ability to engage in discussion and argument are all valued attributes of the "ideal student," according to current educational theory. Individualistic parents tend to socialize their children to ask questions, "speak up," and "tell the teacher what you need." However, parents from collectivistic backgrounds may be confused or even disturbed by teachers' emphasis on oral self-expression (Delgado-Gaitan). In their view, a quiet student learns more and is more respectful than one who speaks up, singling herself out from the group and taking time away from the teacher's lesson.

**Example**

When a teacher told a Latina immigrant mother that her daughter was "outstanding" and contributed a great deal to class discussions, the mother's reaction was dismay: "I tried to teach my daughter not to 'show off,' but it seemed that it was not working." She apparently interpreted "outstanding" as "standing out." It turned out that by encouraging the child to talk more, the teacher was fostering behavior positively valued in school but negatively valued at home (Quiroz, Greenfield, & Altchech).

**Strategy**

Many U.S. educators in this current era of reform increasingly focus on "critical thinking," "Socratic" questioning and discussion, and a "constructivist" theory of learning that emphasizes a child's active participation in making meaning. If immigrant students from backgrounds

Two-year-old Tyler grabbed a toy truck from Carmen, the two-year-old daughter of his babysitter, Lina. Lina and Carmen had recently emigrated from Mexico. "Share with him," said Lina to her daughter. Tyler's aunt, a researcher in the Bridging Cultures Project, observed the interaction and thought how it differed from her own socializing instinct as a member of the dominant, individualistic culture. She probably would have told Tyler not to grab the toy from Carmen. Because their cultures have different developmental goals, in a situation like this, one adult saw an opportunity to teach about sharing, while the other saw an opportunity to teach about personal property.

stressing quiet respect are to succeed in school, they need to be coached on how to become active participants in their own learning. Teachers can also discuss with parents why active learning is important for their children. At the same time, it's crucial for teachers to allow students some flexibility when their cultural background has not prepared them to voice opinions or publicly ask and respond to questions. Teachers can instead let students write journal entries or engage in small-group discussions about a complex topic, for example. When grading students on classroom participation, a stringent adherence to more individualistic standards may be unfair.

### *Parents' Roles Versus Teachers' Roles*

The educational maxim "parents are children's first teachers" guides the thinking of many educators. Letters are often sent home urging parents to work with their children on specific academic skills, explaining this necessary role for parents. Sometimes schools suggest how many hours parents should spend, where to have the child study, and what supplies to have on hand. Some immigrant parents may not consider this an appropriate role for themselves (Quiroz & Greenfield). Seeing the functions of teacher and parent as clearly distinct, they may believe that academic instruction should be restricted to school. Moreover, if they had limited educational opportunities in their homelands, they may not have the subject-matter skills to tutor their children or help with homework. They may believe that their primary responsibility is to socialize the child, not to teach academics.

**Example**

When parents don't follow school suggestions to work on specific academic skills with their children at home, teachers may infer that the parents do not value education. Some schools also offer parenting courses, presuming that parents need instruction on how to discipline their children or prepare them for schooling. Yet, suggestions about how to rear children may not be well received. Moreover, the kind of parenting that individualistic teachers seek to promote may be seen as undermining the collectivistic values of home. Parents may wish that teachers would use the parents' socializing strategies more — to produce more respectful students.

**Strategy**

One Bridging Cultures teacher has developed a volunteer program that encourages parents to come into the classroom at their convenience and help in a variety of capacities. Because her classroom is a combined K–2, even parents with a limited education can assist with many of the early academic tasks. Not only do the Latino immigrant parents help the children, but some also learn along with them. Classroom instruction reinforces parents' literacy skills, in particular. When parents read to children from books written at a higher level than children could read on their own, children's linguistic models are stretched, as are parents' own skills. The presence of parents also introduces norms of respect for adults; at the same time, parents get to see how the teacher manages group discussions and elicits involvement from the students.

In this particular community, the fact that this teacher is Latina and speaks Spanish provides maximum opportunity for developing understanding between home and school. Through this kind of volunteer program, parents can see how the teacher's role takes shape in a U.S. classroom; and teachers can glimpse the roles parents are comfortable with vis-à-vis schooling.

### *Personal Property Versus Sharing*

In many Latino immigrant families, most possessions are shared. People use things when they need them. For example, it is perfectly acceptable for a child who can not

find a clean shirt in his own drawer to go to his brother's drawer and borrow one without needing any special permission. Responsibility for taking care of material goods is also shared. Simply put, sharing is the norm and personal property the exception.

**Example**

Even though property (such as art materials and books) technically belongs to the school, schools behave as though it belongs to individual children. Children are often expected to keep items in their desks and care for them as though they owned them. Failure to observe this norm by children socialized to share may be perceived by the teacher as a lack of respect for personal property. Some Latino immigrant parents who observe in the classroom may wonder why children are not allowed or encouraged to share more.

**Strategy**

Teachers can support students' opportunities to share, while maintaining some examples of individual property in the classroom. There is no reason art materials cannot be shared, jointly cared for, and stored in a place where all students have access to them. Because students will inevitably have to cope with the reality of private property in this society, however, teachers need to explain this cultural norm. Classroom situations may provide opportunities to discuss which norm is being observed and may also offer examples for discussion with parents. When a contrary expectation prevails (such as the expectation to treat normally shared property as the domain of an individual), children and their parents deserve to know about it. Bridging Cultures teachers have talked about occasions in their classrooms when a child needed a pencil or a ruler, and the whole class rushed to share.

## Easy Ways to Avoid Conflict and Promote Harmony

Bridging Cultures teachers have been amazed at how their increased awareness of culture — starting with their own — has enabled them to forestall conflicts in the classroom. They now recognize their own culture-based approaches to problem solving and can better anticipate their students' perspectives. When teachers and parents are both aware of how their orientations differ, they have a greater chance of forging alliances and discovering goals for children that they can both support. As a result of shared awareness, parents and teachers have more comfortable and productive communication, and children experience fewer conflicts between home and school values (Quiroz & Greenfield).

### *Making the Classroom Hospitable*

Bridging Cultures teachers have experimented with specific ways to make their classrooms more "culture-friendly" for those students with a more collectivistic orientation. Here are some simple changes that capitalize on children's values of helping and sharing:

- Select two classroom monitors rather than one, and allow them to work together.
- Allow students to help each other study vocabulary (students with greater English proficiency help those with lesser).
- Allow students to work in small groups to preview their homework assignments, discussing possible strategies for problems and assuring that all understand the assignment. (This also helps students whose parents may not be able to read the assignment in English.)
- Use choral reading, as well as individual reading.
- Have more than one "child of the week," so that the attention is shared.
- Share cleanup of the whole room at once, rather than having each group clean up an activity center before the children move to another (observed in a kindergarten classroom).
- Allow joint "ownership" of classroom crayons rather than a box per child.

To create more of a family or group feeling in their classrooms, Bridging Cultures teachers hold group celebrations of children's accomplishments, when individual accomplishments can be lauded in light of the contribution they are making to the well-being of the group. One Bridging Cultures teacher says to her students, "You



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## Mrs. Pérez's Halloween Debacle

The students in Mrs. Pérez's fifth-grade bilingual classroom (Spanish–English) were faced with a difficult choice: Should they have their own Halloween party in class, wear costumes, and bring refreshments from home to share with each other? Or should they don their costumes and go to a community-wide, drug-free parade and celebration at a neighboring naval base? Some wanted to stay in their classroom for a private party, but more were drawn to the community celebration. Mrs. Pérez decided to have the children vote, with the class then doing what the majority wanted.

As it happened, most voted to go to the parade; only six voted to stay at school, two of whom eventually came around to thinking the parade was a good idea. But four children, Selena, Cristina, Donaldo, and Felipe, did not want to go to the parade and continued to feel disappointed about not having the class party. Suspecting that they were not comfortable going to a large event with so many people, Mrs. Pérez gave them the option to stay behind with a parent helper. Only Selena chose this option. The others ultimately went along to the parade. As things turned out, Selena actually chose not to do either. Instead, she stayed home that day. At the celebration, Selena's classmates missed her immensely and found it impossible to enjoy themselves fully at the event for which they had voted.

The incident did not fade from memory. Weeks went by and Mrs. Pérez continued to hear small but persistent conversations about how sad it was that Selena hadn't gotten to do what she wanted. The class seemed unsettled about the outcome of their decisionmaking process. It wasn't until Mrs. Pérez participated in Bridging Cultures that she understood how all this might be related to the values of the children's collectivistic culture. Her students were reflecting a deep-seated discomfort with a process that inherently discounts some people's wishes. Mrs. Pérez realized that with this group of largely immigrant Latino students she might have done better to use a more extended process of discussion and problem solving, which could eventually have led to consensus. Since the "Halloween debacle," as she has come to think of it, she has consciously provided opportunities to solve problems and make decisions on a much more communal basis. It may take longer, she says, but once the children come to consensus, they are more committed to the agreed course of action. The challenge for her now is to teach her students how a more individualistic culture goes about decisionmaking and to incorporate elements of both approaches in her classroom, so that her students have bicultural competence.

know how you feel when someone accomplishes something in your family. It's just like that here."

### *Engaging Parents as Resources*

When teachers recognize how their own views about child development and schooling are influenced by a particular cultural perspective, they can more easily see parents as sources of knowledge about a different perspective. A stance that reflects the teacher's respect for the funds of knowledge that reside in children's communities is critical to cross-cultural understanding (Dauber & Epstein 1993; Moll & Greenberg 1991). As one European American Bridging Cultures teacher commented, "I have a whole different perspective on culture and how it affects the decisions I make as a teacher. I see that *my* actions are culturally bound also." Another said, "Many approaches [to cross-cultural education] deal with the surfaces of cultures. They do not deal with the most basic, important, deep values that generate daily behaviors." Bridging Cultures teachers find that once they are attuned to the very existence of these deeper values, they quickly develop much better relationships with parents and students.

Studies of Latino immigrant families repeatedly show that parents are highly interested in their children's education (Goldenberg & Gallimore 1995). Research with "minority" and poor parents suggests they would like to be much more involved with schools than they are (Metropolitan Life 1987). Studies including African American parents





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report the same: high interest without the necessary conditions to support involvement (Chavkin & Williams 1993).

Bridging Cultures teachers have used the individualism-collectivism framework to guide how they approach and work with parents and understand their thinking. This framework has guided their home visits, parent-teacher conferences, and other formal and informal outreach opportunities to learn more about the lives of children outside of school and about parents' expectations for their children. By using the framework, Bridging Cultures teachers have been able to translate parent motivation into parent involvement.

### *Gauging How to Support Parent Involvement*

Immigrant parents have often come to the United States with the express goal of improving their children's educational opportunities. As noted earlier, they may want to become more involved with their child's schooling, but they may not know just how to comply with the expectations schools have of them. A seeming lack of compliance may result from parents' own limited educational experiences or from direct conflicts between home and school values.

Although parents do value academic growth, especially in literacy, less-educated immigrants from Mexico and Central America may not provide experiences in the home that promote text-based literacy (Goldenberg & Gallimore). They may read to their children but not ask the children to respond to text the way more individualistic parents do (e.g., answer questions about what happened when, guess what might happen next, express their thoughts about the story). Instead, the value of reading to children may be seen primarily as a way of building family unity or passing on moral lessons *(consejos)* (Valdés).

Because of possible cultural differences, when teachers and parents are setting joint goals in a parent–teacher conference, the teacher should not assume that suggested literacy activities for the home will be carried out in the expected way. Instead, Bridging Cultures teachers make a point of finding out what kinds of activities the parent is comfortable doing and then build on those. And if parents are asked to participate in their children's homework activities, teachers must offer them a range of ways to do so (Goldenberg & Gallimore; Trumbull, Greenfield, Rothstein-Fisch, & Quiroz in press). Often, parents feel more comfortable calling upon older children, who have been through the American school system, as homework helpers.

### *Understanding Parents' Ways of Participating in School Decisionmaking*

The most proactive school districts try to involve parents in the usual school events, but also in the actual planning and operation of schools. Although the professional staff of educators takes leadership in conceptualizing curriculum frameworks, instructional programs, assessments, and the like, parents are encouraged to become involved in making important decisions, such as how to allocate resources. At times, culture-based differences about participating in groups — and particularly in processes of decisionmaking — get in the way. Immigrants from more collectivistic backgrounds may value consensus over the U.S. cultural norm of "one man, one vote" (see Mrs. Pérez's Halloween Debacle, p. 12).

## Tapping Community Knowledge Through Ethnographic Inquiry

Bridging Cultures teachers have learned how to become ethnographers — students of culture — in their own classrooms and schools. Other teachers can use the dimensions of individualism and collectivism as a framework for their own inquiry process. Ideally, teachers should visit students' homes. They can also talk with paraprofessionals and others from students' communities to learn relevant information. One of the most important pieces of information is the parents' own educational background — how many years of school they have completed and where. Answers to these questions may give the teacher hints about how best to work with the parents in supporting their child's learning.

Bridging Cultures teachers have found that an important component of successful communication with parents is

taking a partnership approach, speaking in terms of "how we can meet the needs of students" instead of "what you need to do with your child." While the teachers present themselves as partners with the parents, they recognize that the parents will tend to defer to them as the experts on education.

Ethnography as practiced by Bridging Cultures teachers is not a cold, scientific research activity but rather a process of conscious learning and building relationships. As one teacher said, "I have noticed that I am taking a new tone toward parents. When I say, 'We've got a problem. We need help,' versus 'You need to do this' (whatever it is), they will absolutely help. I will ask them with regard to a problem, 'What do you think?' Just asking seems to make all the difference in the world."

## Summary

Bridging cultures between home and school is not as hard as it sometimes seems, but it does require getting beyond the surface details of behavior to the underlying cultural reasons for it. The individualism-collectivism framework can help teachers, first, to better understand the source of their own orientation to child-rearing and schooling and, second, to see how it might differ in significant ways from that of many immigrant parents. In turn, when teachers better understand parents' ways of thinking and the norms in children's homes, they can find ways to make classrooms more hospitable for students and their families. Having a committed peer group with whom to share ideas, such as the one Bridging Cultures teachers have had for the past three-and-a-half years, helps enormously. We hope other teachers reading this document will see possibilities for thoughtful innovations in their classrooms and start to share them with colleagues in their own schools.

*The incident at the beginning of this brief is based on transcripts from several parent-teacher conferences studied by P. M. Greenfield, C. Raeff, & B. Quiroz and reported in their 1998 article, Cross-cultural conflict in the social construction of the child. *Aztlan: The Journal of Chicano Studies*, 23, 115.

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## The Bridging Cultures Project

Bridging Cultures is an action-research project that set out to find ways to improve cross-cultural communication in the classroom. A partnership among education researchers at WestEd, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), California State University at Northridge, and seven elementary teachers from six public schools in Southern California, the Bridging Cultures group is designing and field-testing professional development materials, workshops, and course modules for in-service as well as pre-service teachers. Currently, the project is supporting teachers to work specifically with immigrant Latino students and their families. In addition to the authors of this brief, the Bridging Cultures research team includes Blanca Quiroz, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

We are also documenting how understanding the individualism–collectivism framework can affect teachers, particularly (1) the perspective teachers gain on their own culture and that of schools; (2) how this influences their thinking and practice; and (3) teachers' increased abilities to build relationships with families that support student success in school. See also: *Bridging Cultures between Home and School: A Guide for Teachers* (in press), Trumbull et al.; "Bridging Cultures with Classroom Strategies," C. Rothstein-Fisch, P. M. Greenfield, & E. Trumbull (1999). *Educational Leadership, 56* (7), 64-67; and "Bridging Cultures with a Parent-Teacher Conference," B. Quiroz, P. M. Greenfield, and M. Altchech (1999). *Educational Leadership 56* (7), 68-70.

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